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OUR INHERITED PRACTICE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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III. ROSSEAU, IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

This is the third of a series of articles which describe the development of modern practices in elementary education. The first article treated of the development of elementary schools to teach children to read religious texts. The second described the dancing-master education of the eighteenth century which aimed to make the little children of wealthy parents into young ladies and gentlemen as expeditiously as possible. The strongest single influence which stimulated European teachers and parents to break away from these practices was Rousseau's *Emile* which was published in 1762. The study of this work in its relation to contemporary practice may be illustrated in connection with the following quotation:

He who cannot fulfill the duties of a father has no right to become such. Neither poverty, nor business, nor fear of the world, can excuse him from the duty of supporting and educating his own children.

A recent writer in speaking of this plea by Rousseau to parents to concern themselves with the life and education of their children, says it "may be noted with one comment. How additionally abominable his conduct to his own children was if he really believed what he wrote," referring to the fact that Rousseau sent all his own children to a foundling asylum. (G. Hodgson, *Studies in French Education*, p. 161.)

Concerning this kind of study of the history of education, and concerning this particular circumstance, it may be said that it makes no difference in the historical significance of the *Emile*, whether Rousseau practiced what he preached or not. That is a minor issue. The facts of historical importance are first,

the prevailing practice of parental neglect of children; second, the scathing criticism of this practice and the appeal for reform embodied in the *Emile*, and third, the influence of this appeal in modifying the prevailing and subsequent practice. The prevailing practice was described in a previous paper. The essence of Rousseau's contention is contained in the quotation given above. Rousseau's influence on the prevailing practice is suggested in these words of Taine:

If you would comprehend the success of *Emile* call to mind the children we have described, the embroidered, gilded, dressed-up, powdered little gentlemen, decked with sword and sash, . . . alongside of these little ladies of six years, still more artificial, . . . so many veritable dolls to which rouge is applied, and with which a mother amuses herself each morning for an hour and then consigns them to her maids for the rest of the day. This mother reads *Emile*. It is not surprising that she immediately strips the poor little thing [of its social harness of whalebone, iron, and hair] and determines to nurse her next child herself.¹

In fact the *Emile* brought children into style for a period, and fashionable mothers found time to devote to their education. To be sure, much of this interest was superficial and temporary, as with any other fashion, but in many cases it was sincere and permanent.

As regards subsequent practice, Rousseau was the prophet of the spirit exhibited later by Pestalozzi as he entered into the lives of the poor children about him—the spirit so commonly associated with Froebel and expressed in his invitation, "Come let us live with our children."

It is easy to show that much of what Rousseau wrote was but an expression of his own irresponsible character, as Davidson has done; it is also easy to show that much of his own life was inconsistent with the fine sentiments which he expressed in his writing; but it seems to me that both of these facts are of slight importance compared with the large influence exerted by certain of his theories during the nineteenth century in modifying the practical treatment of children. Even if the *Emile* had been published anonymously, its historical significance, in reflect-

¹ Taine, *Ancient Régime* (Holt), p. 273.

ing, protesting against, and modifying current educational practices would be the same.

If we look at the *Emile* from this point of view, namely its relation to practice, we get a valid basis for selection in the historical study of the book. For example, let us apply this criterion to Rousseau's suggestion to bring up Emile in isolation from society. Many writers on Rousseau have made this point a basis for rejecting his theory of education. From the standpoint of its influence on educational practice the isolation of Emile need not be considered. I doubt if there is a single instance of any serious attempt to carry out Rousseau's suggestion along this line to any considerable degree, whereas other practices which he suggested have become the dominant tendencies of modern education. In fact the chief continuers of the Rousseau movement in education, Basedow, Pestalozzi, Herbart, and Froebel, all assign the greatest importance to the social activities of little children and have no use for the anti-social elements in Rousseau's doctrine.

The same method of study may be applied to the opening sentence of the *Emile*, "Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Author to Nature; but everything degenerates in the hands of man." Among the serious practical followers of Rousseau this "Nature is right" theory found little or no place. Pestalozzi believed strongly in human disciplining and Herbart provides for very harsh punishments. Froebel when absorbed in his religious reflections said the same as Rousseau, but in practice had no place for the "let children do as they please" policy implied.

Moreover, these high-sounding phrases have little definite content. Hundreds of writers besides Rousseau have conjured with the word "Nature," and in many different ways. What does it mean? At one extreme you find Rousseau who would oppose Nature to social organization, and at the other extreme those who include the highest form of social organization as one of the phenomena of Nature. Neither interpretation contributes very directly to a determination of practice in elementary schools. On the other hand, there may be found in the *Emile* a consider-

able body of concrete advice which is directly related to practice and has been historically the basis for reforms in practice. Let us proceed to a consideration of some of these points.

The first and most fundamental of Rousseau's suggestions is the necessity of studying children. In the preface to the *Emile* he says this is the subject in which he is most interested, the one he knows most about, and the one a person should have in mind in reading the book.

We do not know childhood. Acting on the false ideas we have of it, the farther we go the farther we wander from the right path. Those who are wisest are attached to what is important for men to know, without considering what children are able to apprehend. They are always looking for the man in the child, without thinking of what he was before he became a man. This is the study upon which I am most intent, to the end that, though my method may be chimerical and false, profit may always be derived from my observations. I may have a very poor conception of what ought to be done, but I think I have a correct view of the subject on which we are to operate. *Begin, then, by studying your pupils more thoroughly, for it is very certain that you do not know them.* Now, if you read this book of mine with this purpose in view, I do not believe that it will be without profit to you.²

If we adopt Rousseau's own recommendation then, we will read the *Emile* to find out about children. Let us examine some of the most important theories of the book from this standpoint.

The first thing to notice about children is that they exhibit characteristic differences at different ages. Rousseau divides the child's life into the following periods: from birth to 5; from 5 to 12; from 12 to 15, and from 15 to 20. Each one of these periods possesses native characteristics which are the results of natural growth of the body, that is, due to the natural process of maturing.³

The second point to be noticed is that for each one of these stages there are certain appropriate activities or modes of living. If these appropriate activities are provided or stimulated, the

²*Emile* (Appleton), p. xlii. Italics not in original.

³I shall use the word maturing instead of development because the latter is employed in so many different senses; e.g., it sometimes means maturing, sometimes the growth that comes as the result of exercise as in developing a muscle, sometimes the orderly unfolding of a subject, etc.

healthiest and most satisfactory and complete maturing will result. If this is not done, but on the contrary activities suited to a later stage of maturity are provided, the final result will be less satisfactory.

Rousseau argues this position from two different standpoints, first, sentimental, and second, scientific or psychological. The sentimental appeal which is printed below is hardly valid as an educational argument, but it was probably more influential with sentimental people than the scientific argument.

Of all the children who are born, only a half, at most, come to adolescence; and it is probable that your pupil will not live to be a man.

What must we think, then, of that barbarous education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, which loads a child with chains of every sort, and begins by making him miserable in order to prepare for him, long in advance, some pretended happiness which it is probable he will never enjoy? Were I even to assume that education to be reasonable in its object, how could we witness, without indignation, these poor unfortunates subject to an insupportable yoke, and condemned, like galley-slaves, to never-ending toil, without any assurance that such sacrifices will ever be useful to them? The age of mirth is passed in the midst of tears, chastisements, threats, and slavery.

O men, be humane; it is your foremost duty. Be humane to all classes and to all ages, to everything not foreign to mankind. What wisdom is there for you outside of humanity? *Love childhood; encourage its sports, its pleasures, its amiable instincts.* Who of you has not sometimes looked back with regret on that age when a smile was ever on the lips, when the soul was ever at peace? Why would you take from those little innocents the enjoyment of a time so short which is slipping from them, and of a good so precious which they can not abuse? Why would you fill with bitterness and sorrow those early years so rapidly passing, which will no more return to them than to you?⁴

Rousseau's psychological argument for providing activities appropriate to each age of childhood is reiterated throughout the book.

Nature would have children be children before being men. If we wish to pervert this order, we shall produce precocious fruits which will have neither maturity nor flavor, and will speedily deteriorate: we shall have young doctors and old children. Childhood has its own way of seeing, think-

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 45.

ing, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to substitute our own for them.⁵

Each age, each period of life, has its proper perfection, a sort of maturity which is all its own.⁶

To appreciate the relation to practice of this most fundamental of Rousseau's contentions, it is only necessary to recall the description of child-life in the eighteenth century given in the previous paper. The ideal of the parent was to make young ladies and gentlemen of children as early as possible. To this end they were initiated into adult activities as early as six years of age. In their portraits they were so generally represented as little grown-ups that one might wonder if there were any children in those days.

The same failure to provide material appropriate for children occurred in the work of the religious elementary schools, and of the Latin secondary schools which admitted children at nine years of age. In the elementary schools the failure was evidenced in the study of the catechism and the three R's by methods which provided no opportunity for the physical activity of little children, but required silence and restraint, and which never considered whether the material was understood as long as it was learned. The failure in the first years of the secondary schools has been emphasized by Quick. The Renaissance ideal of the scholar

led schoolmasters to attach little importance to the education of *children*. Directly their pupils were old enough for Latin grammar the schoolmasters were quite at home; but till then, the children's time seemed to them of little value, and they neither knew nor cared to know how to employ it. If the little ones could learn by heart forms of words which would afterwards "come in useful," the schoolmasters were ready to assist such learning by unsparing application of the rod, but no other learning seemed worthy even of a caning.⁷

Problems of educational practice which grow directly out of Rousseau's demand that activities appropriate to the degree of maturity of the child should be provided, are to be found in the teaching of every subject. In teaching religion, which was his-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁷ *Educational Reformers*, p. 19.

torically the first aim of the modern elementary school, shall we expect of children those responses and attitudes which are bound up with adult conceptions of a supreme being, with adult feelings of fear and dependence, and adult interests in theological questions, or shall we recognize that the immature child lacks these experiences, but possesses certain other tendencies such as the interest in story, in the dramatic, in objective nature, and proceed to direct these interests as the modern Sunday school is beginning to do? In teaching literature, shall we impose on children adult classics which they cannot possibly appreciate, or shall we carefully select for each stage of childhood stories which will be appreciated, childish though they be, realizing that there may be a gradual transition from the classics of childhood's literature, the nursery rhymes, fairy tales, etc., to the classics of adult literature? In teaching art, shall we provide for little children pictures embodying the mature art ideals of Raphael and Michael Angelo, or shall we use simple pictures of things that children care about, and that appeal to their native interests in action, color, or story-telling?

Rousseau was not the first to argue the necessity of providing material adapted to children's capacities and interests. The Port Royalists during their brief period of activity in France (1646 to 1661) appreciated this principle in its application to the development of literary appreciation, and labored to provide good French stories, largely fables, etc., translated from the Latin, which would be appreciated by the children in their schools. No doubt many other isolated instances of the same sort could be given. But it was Rousseau that was the voice and prophet of the great movement of the nineteenth century, to give children's literature, "childish literature," if you will, a place in the schools. There is a direct evidence of this in the work of Basedow's followers in Germany, who, according to Schlosser (who does not view the tendency with favor) soon deluged Germany with a silly literature for children, and sought to bring up little children in such a way as to make grown people into children.⁸

Rousseau did not stop with the general proposition which we

⁸ Quoted in Monroe, *Text Book in History of Education*, p. 580.

have been discussing, but described in detail the psychological characteristics of children of different ages and recommended specific treatment to correspond to each characteristic. Let us review a few of these special principles which have been most revolutionary in their influence on practice.

One of the most influential of these principles is the importance of physical activity in the maturing and education of children. In the Europe of Rousseau's time, infants were bound in swaddling clothes, children in the home were to be seen, not heard, and silence and sitting still were the rule of the school. Against this, Rousseau protested on physiological and psychological grounds. Concerning the current method of dressing infants, he said,

The inaction and constraint imposed on the limbs of a child can but impede the circulation of the blood and other fluids, prevent him from growing strong, and weaken his constitution. In countries where these extravagant precautions are not taken, the men are all tall, strong, and well proportioned; but where children are bound in swaddling clothes, the country swarms with the hump-backed, the lame, the knock-kneed, and the sickly—with all sorts of patched up men. For fear that the body may be deformed by a free movement, we hasten to deform it by putting it in a press. We would purposely render it impotent in order to prevent it from becoming crippled!⁹

The movements of children, Rousseau says, are needs of their constitution, which is trying to fortify itself.¹⁰

Answering an imaginary objector who is alarmed at the notion of a child spending his early years in action, but doing nothing of an academic nature, Rousseau said,

Really! Is it nothing to be happy? Is it nothing to jump, play, and run, all the day long? In no other part of his life will he be so busy. Plato, in his *Republic*, which is deemed so austere, brings up children only in festivals, games, songs, and pastimes. It might be said that he has done all when he has really taught them how to enjoy themselves; and Seneca, speaking of the ancient Roman youth, says they were always on their feet, and were never taught anything they could learn while seated. Were they of any less value for this when they reached the age of manhood?¹¹

⁹ *Emile*, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Concerning the relation existing between learning and physical activity in children from five to twelve, Rousseau said,

In proportion as a sensitive being becomes active, he acquires a discernment proportional to his powers. If then you would cultivate the intelligence of your pupil, cultivate the power which it is to govern. Give his body continual exercise; make him robust and sound in order to make him wise and reasonable; let him work, and move about, and run, and shout, and be continually in motion; let him be a man in vigor and soon he will be such by force of reason.¹²

Sufficient has been said to make clear Rousseau's notion of the importance of physical activity, particularly in the early stages of childhood. His immediate practical followers provided a large amount of physical activity in their schools. This was notably the case with Basedow, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. Of these three men, it was Pestalozzi whose practices came to dominate elementary schools in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, the more formal elements were copied, and the principle of physical activity neglected, and elementary schools have only recently, under the later influence of Froebel, provided for "acting" rather than for "listening."

The preceding discussion concerned physical activity as one of the characteristics of children, and the necessity of providing appropriate stimulus at this stage of maturity in order to produce satisfactory results in the matured adult. Another phase of the general question of adapting education to the maturity of children concerns the reasoning capacity of children and appropriate stimuli for it. The theory at the basis of current practice in elementary schools in Rousseau's time, and, for that matter, in many schools today, was that children are not capable of reasoning, but that they have very plastic memories. Consequently, the chief task of elementary education was to have children memorize a mass of material, largely catechism, Bible texts, etc., which they were not expected to understand at the time, but which they would appreciate later in life. Against this theory and practice Rousseau protested in a long and vigorous, but somewhat confusing, discussion. The substance of his argument is contained in these two propositions.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

1. Children do reason about the concrete things of their ordinary experience which are related to their present and obvious interests.

2. They do not reason about the abstractions of morality and theology, and matters pertaining to the remote future. In these statements, the word "reasoning" is used to denote thinking which involves judging or inferring or solving problems. That children do this kind of thinking Rousseau affirms in these words:

I am very far from thinking, however, that children are incapable of any kind of reasoning. On the contrary, I see that they reason very well on whatever they know, and on whatever is related to their present and obvious interests. But it is with respect to their knowledge that we are deceived. We give them credit for knowledge which they do not have, and make them reason on matters which they cannot comprehend.¹³

Now, if we apply Rousseau's fundamental principle that for each stage of maturity appropriate activities should be provided, it would follow that in practice children should be given opportunities to reason, but that they should not be required to learn things which can be understood only by people of greater maturity and experience. This is the kind of intellectual education that Rousseau provided for his imaginary pupil and the kind that since his time has constituted an increasingly large element in elementary schools. Rousseau provided these opportunities for reasoning largely in connection with nature-study or elementary physics, elementary astronomy, home geography, practical problems in manual construction, measuring, weighing, constructive geometry. What a strong contrast between this enriched experience of the child in connection with which he is stimulated to reason, and the narrow memorizing grind of the traditional elementary school, with its catechism and three R's.

We have discussed two of the characteristics of child-life which Rousseau maintained should be the basis for practice in elementary education; the first was the abundant physical activity natural in children, and the second the fact that children reason.

A third principle of the psychology of children which he

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

emphasized was the necessity of first-hand contact with organic and physical nature in order to get real knowledge, that words in themselves do not convey meaning except as the child has had the actual experience with which to fill in the meaning. Contemporary teachers either considered it unnecessary to give knowledge of the world of things, or assumed that such knowledge could be secured through a study of words and books. So thoroughly did Rousseau oppose this practice that he advocated making the education of the child from five to twelve entirely "education through experience and the senses." There had been educational reformers before Rousseau who advocated a study of things. Comenius (1592-1671) was the most important of these, but he had not succeeded in reforming school practice, and even if he had, the study of things that he advocated was largely through books and pictures. But it is this phase of the Rousseau movement that first and most extensively modified the practice of elementary teaching, to some degree in the schools of Basedow, but more particularly in the "object teaching" of Pestalozzi and his followers. If space permitted, Rousseau's attitude on this question could be related very definitely to the psychological tendencies of the period. A quotation will suffice to present his views:

In any study whatever, representative signs are of no account without the idea of the things represented. The child, however, [in ordinary practice] is always restricted to these signs without ever being made to comprehend any of the things which they represent. We imagine that we are teaching him a description of the earth, but we are merely teaching him to know maps. We teach him the names of cities, countries and rivers, but he conceives them as existing nowhere save on the paper where they are pointed out to him.¹⁴

As all that enters the human understanding comes through the senses, the first reason of man is a sensuous reason; and it is this which serves as a basis for the intellectual reason. Our first teachers of philosophy are our feet, our hands and our eyes. To substitute books for all these is not to teach us to reason, but to teach us to use the reason of others; it is to teach us to believe much and never to know anything.¹⁵

The purpose of this paper has been to summarize briefly a few of those aspects of Rousseau's theory that have been most

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

influential in revolutionizing the practice of teaching in elementary schools. The points that have been selected for emphasis are

1. That educators should study children.
2. That children exhibit characteristics peculiar to each age.
3. That each age has its own kind of perfection or maturity.
4. That activities appropriate to each stage of maturity should be provided, the child to live as a child, not as an adult.
5. That the abundant physical activity of children should not be repressed, but should be the basis of growing and learning.
6. That children do reason and should be encouraged to reason.
7. That children need to learn by first-hand contact with the things of organic and physical nature, not through words and books.

It is an easy matter to continue the study of the *Emile* from the standpoint of its influence on practice, and to show that in the recognition and utilization of particular instincts of children, in the methods of teaching drawing, geometry, laboratory science, home geography, in the use of Robinson Crusoe as an introduction to the study of human industry, in the industrial approach to the study of human institutions, and in many other respects, Rousseau was the prophet, and, to a considerable extent, the source of the reforms which occurred in the practice of teaching in elementary schools during the nineteenth century.